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Appleby Archaeology Group

On March 2nd the group enjoyed a very informative talk from Rachel Newman, Assistant Director, University of Lancaster Archaeology Unit, on recent excavations at Fremington and at Dacre church. It is difficult in this report to convey both the details given and the enthusiasm of the speaker.

She began by saying that very little is known of Cumbria in the period between the departure of the Romans in 410 and the Norman Conquest. Probably little changed, life going on as before with the settlements that had been used in the Iron Age and then in the Romano-British period continuing to be used. She explained that documentary sources give some information and outlined the history, before describing the excavations.

The power of the Anglo-Saxon kingdoms changed over the centuries, Northumbria was the leading kingdom under Edwin and at its peak in the 7th. Cumbria was a borderland affected by powers from the north, south and east and in the 9th century from the west, from the Vikings. In 954 at the Battle of Stainmore Eric Blood Axe was killed bringing an end to Scandinavian domination in Northumbria. Cumbria was probably part of Northumbria for a century around the 7th. There may have been periods of Cumbrian autonomy. By the 10th century Wessex predominated and the Anglo-Saxon Chronicles record that in 926/927 Athelstane, King of Wessex, marched north to meet those in power at Eamont Bridge. Eamont Bridge as we know it was not an entity until Medieval times. Did the name refer to a river crossing or boundary?

The talk continued with a review of the references to religion. Edwin, King of Northumbria was converted to Christianity in the early 7th century. Bede writes that in 685 St Cuthbert travelled to Carlise to dedicate a monastery, around the same time monasteries at Cartmel Heversham and Dacre are mentioned. Anglo-Saxon stone crosses found on the west coast and in the Eden Valley indicate the presence of religious establishments. By Scandinavian times the parish system was beginning.

Miss Newman then described the recent excavations at Fremington and at Dacre, showing slides of the sites and of the artefacts found.

Fremington.

Prior to the laying of a Shell pipeline there were archaeological surveys and excavations in the vicinity of the Romano-British sites around Brougham. An Anglo-Saxon site was discovered at Fremington. Initially a pit was found containing hand made pottery suggesting a prehistoric site. This find led to a more extensive

excavation which revealed rectangular buildings and grubenhauser, hollows in the ground which would have had a simple super structure with possibly a suspended floor. These are the only sunken feature buildings in the north and are typically Anglo-Saxon. The pottery found was in the Bronze Age tradition, but may have been made in 7-8th century as evidence of a kiln was found.

Dacre

Bede mentions a miracle at a monastery at Dacre but the location is not given. There were two Dacres in the Kingdom of Northumbria, one near Pately Bridge which has no features to suggest an ecclesiastical site whereas at Dacre near Pooley Bridge there is a Medieval church with earth works running into the churchyard and evidence of a curving boundary indicative of an early churchyard, possibly Celtic. Objects that can be seen at the church include the four Dacre Bears, a stone sculpture with beautiful complex carving of about 800 and the 10th century Dacre Cross. Earlier excavation of what was said to be a tunnel from the church to the Peel Tower found a drain, was this a monastery drain?

Excavation from 1981 onwards were instigated because of a house extension but little archaeology was found in the immediate area and a wider area was examined by geophysics and excavated. The earliest features were signs of a ditch, wattle fence and post holes. The drain was looked at again and it was thought that the stones are re-worked Roman stones. A large cemetery with burials in Christian orientation was excavated, no humans remains were found except for the enamel shells from teeth; most burials were of adults. The cemetery must have been de-consecrated by the 13th century as the burials lie outside the Medieval churchyard. 9-10th century coffin nails and locks were found. Many of the finds indicated a high status site. These included fragments of window glass, pre-Norman coins and metal artefacts such as a 6th century belt buckle, an 8th or 9th century gold ring and a copper escutcheon. The metal work is of a high quality and forms the largest collection of pre-Norman metal work in the north west.

The talk concluded with a resume of the evidence to suggest that the site was monastic. The audience was left to decide! A strong indicator was perhaps the finding of a post-Roman stylus which would have been used for scratching on to wax. Writing and literacy in the Dark Ages were the preserve of churchmen and an ecclesiastical prerogative.

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